

The Fire

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Summary: A squad of ODSTs embark on a mission to enact the Cole Protocol (or so they're told) at the center of a city long lost to the Covenant. The story deals with loss, death, sacrifice and hope and focuses on one main character and the journey he goes through, both mental and physical. This is a submission to the Halo Waypoint Community Creative Writing Event.

1. Stasis

CHAPTER 1

The night gathers, the sun sets, and all light leaves this world. Some say that death is just a new beginning, that there lays a world beyond this one, where all the dead shall be judged and all those deemed good shall prosper. But is that just a lie we tell ourselves so we can sleep well at night? What if, after death, there truly is nothing. What if all that lays beyond the grave is a darkness that swallows us, what if our lives are just a clock counting down to our inevitable in-existence, what if all we do is for nothing- forgotten the moment our bodies lie cold?

It has been three years since I left my family to come here, to join this army. Three years since I have last seen my family, my friends. So much has happened since, and so much has been lost. Everyone had to join the war effort, the Covenant were closing in. World after world, colony after colony, obliterated. Forgotten.

The chamber heats. Vents are letting out puffs of cold gas from the trunk's sides- a noise I remember well. I open my eyes. My mouth is dry, my back a pain and my ears were still cold as ice. My cryo tube slams open and I fall to the ground on my hands, coughing. I clean my dripping nose with the sleeve of my shirt and stand up. The other men are still waking up around me, surely feeling just as comfortable as I did, but I was already zipping up my black under-suit and hooking on my armor pieces. I tighten the leather straps, close the latches at the chest piece's sides and place the sleek helmet on my head,

revealing a holographic Heads Up Display- ready for action. The Commander- a black haired asain female with a lean shape and muscled arms- walks into the room, she too was all suited up and prepared, holding her helmet in her hand.

"Come on ODS'Ts, we are running late for the battle." Commander Kai said. All the other ODS'Ts were getting in line, placing their armor as they went. My friend Benny was fitting his armored boots. We met in training- I first hated him, I hated all of it, but by the end we became close. He had rugged brown hair, a dimpled chin and a hooked nose, and his eyes were blue as ice.

"Commander, is it lost?" Benny asked.

"Not yet." she answered. _Soon. _I thought.

We walked to the drop pod bay as a team of seven, where a holographic image of Helios- the world we are going to fight for- showed on the panel at the center of the room. To it's left were a row of cylindrical pods with two weirdly shaped spikes at their tops. The Commander leaned in, inspecting many charts and territorial diagrams and making her strategic plans, when I saw Benny going to her. They talked for a while, and I sneaked closer.

"Ma'am, he's a shell of a man. Ever since he's gotten word from Kholo about the glassing, about his family... He seems ready to die. Willing to die." I heard Benny's voice. He talked silently and at the side of the room. As if I could not hear.

"Stay with him. Make sure he doesn't sacrifice himself. We can't risk any more sacrifices." the Commander said.

"Yes, Ma'am."

Then he looked at me, he saw I was listening. I did not care. I could not care. All he said was true: there is nothing left for me in life. I have no home to return to, and no family to greet me. Everyone I ever knew is likely dead- my sweet wife Anna with her rushing blonde hair, gray eyes and her dark red lips, always smiling. My daughter Laura, only three years old. She was always a hopeful little girl. But now she's dead and all my hope died with her. My parents, my brother, my friends... all gone, their homes flattened by the plasma beam of just another Covenant super-carrier and their bodies turned to ash.

"You heard that?" Benny asked me.

"I heard." I answered.

Saddened, he lowered his voice. "You look so tired, but so determined. What happened is in the past, Rob, you have to let it go." he said.

"Let it go? Let everything I ever knew and ever was go?" I asked, angered.

"I see the fire in your eyes, Rob. It blinds you. It_ consumes_ you." Benny said, and my eyes filled with tears of rage- but I would not cry, never. "Your dreams of hate and vengeance will only lead you to an early grave. We need you here, alive. We are losing this war, Rob.

You are a fine soldier, we need people like you. So I can't have you kill yourself in battle. Not for me and not even for the greater good." I looked away, at the drop pods at the side of the room. Their hatches were now opened. "Would your family want you to give up so fast?"

"Orbital drop in T-minus 120 seconds." said the ship-board AI, Persephone, in a very robotic yet clearly female voice.

"ODSTs prepare to drop!" the Commander screamed as she herself, prepared to drop.

Each of us took a weapon of choice- mine an Assault Rifle- and placed it inside our pod, in a special compartment at the pod's side. We each took a pistol to fit at the hips of our armor, and plenty of rounds and magazines for both of our weapons. I stepped into my SOEIV pod, sitting back and letting the big U-shaped latch flatten against my back. _From one pod to the next._ I thought. I found the picture of my family in my pod. My beautiful, smiling, wife and my baby daughter, curled in her arms. I took the picture and kissed it, then stuffed it in the side pocket at the left of my chest.

Everyone was ready and set- now the countdown would initiate. "Orbital drop in ten, nine, eight..." Persephone exclaimed, as a small clock ticked down with her at the side of my HUD. "Seven, six, five." This part will be the worst- dizzying, sickening and frightening more than anything I've ever experienced. "Four, three, two, one." she said. "Good luck." Just as she struck her final note, the ground fell beneath me. My stomach jumped and I felt my body press hard against the latch holding me still. A sense of weightlessness filled me and made my belly croak. The tunnel leading to the ship's exit was lit with multiple small red lights, and suddenly they disappeared. In their place was the blackness of space, specked all over with white-yellow stars and blue-black nebulae- one of the most strikingly beautiful views I had ever seen, until I looked down.

Feet first into hell. I thought.

2. The Drop

CHAPTER 2

Helios's atmosphere glowed as the large red sun shone through it. Beneath were thousands of scattered white clouds, encircling the big yellow ball of the planet's surface. There seemed to be mostly deserts, with a few blue seas speckled across. The planet was coming closer and closer, faster and faster. I looked up to see the black Frigate, the _UNSC Ascension_. _It has long, sleek box shape with bulging back sides where the thrusters would be. This was the only home I'd ever have. To both my sides, I could see multiple SOIEV drop pods falling down and trailing red with burning gasses as we penetrated the planet's outer atmosphere. "Where are we landing?" I asked in the general comm.

"Two kilometers off of New Kingston, the city where the farmers colonized. Expect desert terrain: dunes, rocks, mountains. The city has been under attack for 5 days, but it held. There must have been a good defense perimeter around it, but it's been breached two days

ago. The colony then fell silent." Commander Kai said, and as she talked Persephone supplied us with a visual diagram in our HUDs.

"What about enemy forces?" I heard another fellow ODST, Jason, ask through the comms. He was a brute- heavily muscled, two meters tall and with the lack of even basic intelligence. I don't understand how they accepted him to the program. The UNSC must be more desperate than I thought.

"A Covenant assault-carrier is currently orbiting Helios, and we know it sent, there are reports of two smaller battle-cruisers ready to release reinforcements, low on the ground. We can see Phantoms, and Banshees all flying around as well as Wraiths, Ghosts and Choppers on the ground." the Commander answered. I looked far ahead, at the planet's orbit, and could faintly see a purple speck- the Carrier. The one that would later melt this planet's surface until all that's left is fermented glass.

"Choppers?" Jason asked.

"A brute vehicle. Like a motorcycle but much larger. If you see one, hide." said the Commander, as a small picture of it showed in my HUD. _Brutes. _I've only heard of them- tough, barbaric, huge and apish, with a bad temper. _This should be interesting._

_ "_This world is lost. What are we doing here, really?" Harry asked, another ODST from my team.

"Did you miss the debriefing, recruit? ONI has a giant facility based here, unmissable by the Covenant and probably the only reason they didn't glass Helios yet. The Cole Protocol has been initiated, but the stationary ONI agents are not responding. The defense perimeter was only breached a few hours ago and the Covenant must be searching for what kept us fighting here so hard instead of evacuating. There is still time, we must wipe the facility's computers completely." the Commander said, though there was something unusual in her voice. As if she was struggling to say it.

"Oh, so that's what Cunningham is here for?" Benny asked, joking.

Cunningham was our tech expert- Danish- but, unlike most tech experts, she was not one to take that insult without dealing one herself. "And what are you here for, Benny?" Cunningham asked, stabbing back at him.

"Are you implying I am useless, private?" Benny asked.

"I think I was clear enough." she answered.

We broke through the first clouds a minute later, and my SOEIV was initiated every braking maneuver it had. Would it be enough, or would I just smash into the ground and die, forever deemed to be a spatter of blood and flesh on a planet already forgotten. Every ODST was prepared for death, it was hard-coded into our training, but none of us want to die like this. We want to die in battle, where we are needed. Tragic events like these are often called "digging our own graves".

My pod flew through a giant white cloud and as I existed it the ground floor was finally visible- and the city. It was fairly large for such a minor colony, at least 10 square kilometers- its skyscrapers poking out like sharp daggers and the large blocky ONI facility stood at its center, shining orange with the setting sun. Luckily, our LZ seemed to be just a bit of flat land- yellow desert dunes. If I would have landed a kilometer off I would fall into the sea and only god knows what that would bring. _I never thought of drowning myself in a drop. I wonder what that would be called._

"ODSTs, prepare for combat. I detect a squadron of surveying brutes and grunts, some with Fuel Rod Canons, heading for your LZ. The carrier must have targeted an estimated LZ for your drop pod." Persephone said through the comms. I now regretted that we fell on flat land. _There's nowhere to hide. _The grunts' plasma canons will obliterate us and we will have no cover, then the brutes will finish us off. _This will be a massacre._

"How many?" I asked.

"I am unsure, but it seems at least 15 enemy units were sent to pursue you." Persephone answered.

My HUD flashed red, yet another countdown. Ten seconds till we crash. Will I make it? Does it even matter if I make it now that an army of Covenant troops can just finish us off? Five seconds, I close my eyes but in my head the clock is still ticking. I take a deep breath, and then it all goes to hell.

An earth shattering boom sends me flying in my pod with such force I almost rip the U-shaped latch from its hinges. My ears ring from the intensity of the crash, I cant hear anything and my sight is slightly blurred. Lights flash red around me as I open my eyes. The latch raises and I straighten in my seat. I grip the Assault Rifle at my side and smash open the escape hatch and fling myself out into the sandy ground. My squad's pods crash around me- all at only a distance of a hundred meters or less from one another, within seconds of one another. I look up and see two very surprised grunts holding Plasma Pistols, only a few meters from my drop pod.

I hold my Assault Rifle up and unleash short burst of bullet-fire which hit the first bastard right in the face, bullets penetrating the creature's exoskeletal skull right between the eyes and unleashing a spray of blue blood. The second grunt then turned back and ran, its hands flailing like those of an excited child. I shot the creature in it's large triangular gas tank and it crashed to the ground, choking to death in this unfitting atmosphere as a green gas escaped the hole in its back. Before I could turn, I heard a roar coming from my right side, and something large lunged at me.

I hit the sandy ground hard, and the breath was taken from my lungs. The Brute began smashing me across the stomach repetitively as we both lay on the ground. Each punch made me feel more numb and tired, but even so I slid my arm to my right side and unsheathed my small army knife. I stabbed the Brute in the neck and black blood oozed all over my arms. The beast kept clobbering me, even though I had just slit the main artery of its throat, but then a bullet blew through the back of its head, barely missing my face on its continued path. It trailed white smoke, a sniper round.

The Commander pulled the Brute from on top of me and threw it aside as I regained breath. That was close. She gave me a hand and I took it. Lifting my Assault Rifle from the ground, I noticed we were flanked by a group of three Brutes- two holding Spikers and one a Bruteshot as well as twice as many Grunts wielding Needlers, Plasma Pistols and Fuel Rod guns. The Commander threw a grenade into the mess, blasting two grunts and sending a Brute flying. The air was thick with smoke and dust, and hardly anything could be seen- anything but the projectile plasma bolts flying through the air, and the blooming white heat coming from the barrels of weapons being fired. My ears were still in shock from the crash, but I could hear the bullets flying through the air, some barely missing me.

Snapping me out, another Grunt tried to take me by surprise of my situation, releasing a torrent of purple needles at me. I tried dodging but the needles homed on me. Damn. I slammed into the ground, but one needle manage to embed itself in my left shoulder. I felt nothing, not in the adrenaline of battle- my heart was pumping harder and louder than the bullets of my gun, and my vision became red with the fury of battle. On the sand, I aim at the Grunt and shoot- a head-shot.

I began shooting again, this time at the big Brute with the Bruteshot, with fully automatic fire. My clip ran out without making the Brute wince. He began shooting the small explosives at me, and I was forced to close our gap to avoid them. There was no time to reload, not after catching the Brutes attention, so I switch to my pistol and emptied another clip into the ape, hitting him in the stomach, the hands and once in the head. The Brute didn't seem to mind that I shot it, and kept shooting the grenades at me. The last explosive hit so close to me that I felt the heat of it, as it threw me backwards. My pistol was now out as well.

The Brute inserted another set of Bruteshot rounds and I did my best to reload the pistol, there was no time to switch back to the rifle now. I finished faster and shot the Brute's hand, attempting to free his grasp on the weapon, unsuccessfully. Fear gripped me. But then, just in time, his head blasted open with red flesh and black blood, Benny killed him at his left side with a Shotgun. The Brute's brains were spattered on the floor and his head was wide open. The ODSs were now all around me, shooting the Grunts and the one remaining Brute. My heart was still thumping hard. Benny stood in front of me, like a bodyguard.

"Thanks." I told Benny, realizing the armor under his left armpit was melting and bubbling. Concern flashed through me, he must have been hit with a Plasma Pistol. A few more shots echoed, and then everything fell silent- except for the high pitched wailing of a terrified grunt in the distance. I turned around to see a corpse littered battlefield with only one living Grunt trying to run away. The Commander zoomed on him with her sniper and blasted the back of his head. The wailing stopped.

The dust settled and the smoke climbed high in the air. The ODSs were now out around me. The Commander stood at my left and gazed at the view- the beautiful, sleek white city in the backdrop of a sun setting in the sea. A beautiful sight. The Commander stared at us, each in turn- she was counting. "We're missing one." she said and looked between us. "Where is Harry?" she asked.

As we searched the battlefield, I was hit with a burning pain coming from my shoulder, the needle. I grip it hard and pull, grunting with pain as the needle tore out of my muscle and my skin. It would leave a scar. Benny unhooked his chest piece, and held the side of his stomach where he was hit with the plasma bolt. The plasma burned right through the black under-garment and left a red burn in Benny's side, but it didn't seem to be too bad a wound. "Commander, I think I've found Harry." Benny said, pointing at a drop pod flipped on it's side. The escape hatch faced down and it seemed to be broken on the inside. The sand around it was wet with red blood. He must have been shot on his way down, only to crash face first into the ground. An unfortunate fate, and he had only just joined us. This was his first op. He seemed like a good man, and a promising soldier._ God doesn't judge us at all, or maybe we're all guilty and this is our punishment._

3. Home

CHAPTER 3

We were now a group of six ODSs- me, the Commander, Benny, Jason, Frank- an expert driver, even though he was a little cocky- and Cunningham. She had shortly cropped blonde hair and a delicate face, but she was much more tough than she seemed. As we walked to the city, in the desert sands at night, we tried communicating with the rest of the squads, but none of them answered the comms. We assumed the worst.

"Why couldn't we just blast ONI from orbit? It would have saved a lot of lives." Jason asked.

"It would have cost more lives than it would save." the Commander said. "If we don't wipe the local network, the Ascension will resort to bombing the whole city with a Shiva nuke. Civilians will die and this colony will be deemed beyond repair. If we win this war, no one will come back here- we can't fail." But that didn't satisfy anyone.

The city was now sprawling in front of us. A massive place, bigger than my city on Kholo but it still bore much resemblance to it. I looked away to escape those memories, those good memories. I remembered the day Anna gave birth to our daughter, the happiest day of my life. I was living the dream and I didn't even know it. I tucked my family's picture deeper into my pocket, I couldn't think of that. Not now.

We walked through neat streets, not a speck of dirt or garbage on them. It was all so perfect. Too perfect. As I walked between the giant white buildings, I remembered how small and insignificant I was, really. Then I looked up.

Benny caught me staring into the dark night sky. "What are you looking for?" he asked.

"Where's the moon?" I asked as we walked silently, through the ghost town that was once New Kingston- between abandoned cars and beautiful, empty plazas. This world could have become a center of cultural growth, had it been given a chance.

"This planet doesn't have a moon." Benny said. "It's always weird to come to a new world and look up in the sky in search of it, only to learn it doesn't exist. Nature is so random." he said. You had a moon, in Kholo?"

"Yes. It was round and red. Every night, it would light our world- usually a crescent, like a giant red banana." I said, laughing. "But once every 27 days it would be full, and what was before beneath the shadows would reveal- a giant crater. I always wanted to go there when I was a child, but my parents said the moon's atmosphere was toxic. I never went there." I said.

"We have a moon too, at Earth. It's big and white and it's filled with craters. Once people thought it was a giant roll of cheese." he said. We both laughed. "After we win this war, you can come with me. To Earth. They will welcome you there, they will respect you. You can visit our moon, it has plenty large craters and it's open for turis-" _Bang._ Benny's visor cracks as a blue energy beam plows through his helmet. Red blood sprays on my visor. His body falls back limp, like a rag doll. I hear my heart beat- thump, thump, thump. My eyes open wide.

"SNIPER!" I shout and jump to the ground.

I look at my squad, all four of them confused in the commotion. "GET DOWN!" I shout again. A second energy beam burns through the air plowing through Jason's shoulder. He fell back from the force of the shot, and then all the ODS'Ts jumped to the ground. My heart was still thumping. I couldn't bare to look, but I had too. Benny's body lay unmoving on the cemented road and blood was oozing out of his broken helmet. I crawl to him on my hands, and another beam splits the night air, destroying a car's wing mirror and sending glass shards tumbling to the floor.

I hold Ben's head, try to shake life back into his body, but he's gone- dead. Anger fills me. A burning fire at the dark pit which was once my heart. My hand clenches into a fist. Benny was my last true friend. He was trying to help me, bring me back in shape. At that moment I knew- I will kill the son of a bitch who did this. I will split his head in two and smash the pieces to a fine mush after they hit the ground.

Ben had a DMR hidden somewhere, a rifle built for long range situations. Not quite a sniper, but it would do. I grab it from his belt and unhook it. I check the ammo display in the weapon's back. It had a full clip- 15 rounds. I crawl to the back of a car, where Cunningham is already taking cover. "What are you doing?" she asks in her Danish accent. I ignore her, take a breath and pull my head out of cover just enough so I can see where the damned Jackal was hiding. Another beam strikes, at the windshield of the car next to me- behind which the Commander is hiding and glass flies everywhere. She gives me a commanding stare- likely asking me to back down- as she treats Jason's gaping wound with a can of biofoam. I ignore her.

I trace the Jackal's location from the place which it hit the car, and followed the angle of the energy bolt right up to a rooftop. I think I see movement, but just to be sure, I turn on VISR night vision. I was right, the bastard was waiting at the top of a building to our right, holding up his Beam Rifle- prepared. VISR highlighted

the Jackal with a red line that outlined its body. _Piece of shit. _It would likely have shot at us earlier, but it decided to line the shot up perfectly instead. Ben was in front of me when he was shot... It could have been me. I zoom in with my DMR and aim delicately. The thumping of my heart makes my hand shake, and I can't lock the shot.

A beam blasted through the car's tire, and made the car I lean on sink down. I return to cover and close my eyes. That was close. Too close. I take a breath, one last breath and jump out. I ram the trigger- _Bang, Bang, Bang! _The world grows silent. I zoom in again and see the Jackal dead on he rooftop, spotting faint purple blood dripping down the side of the building. I lay back again and sigh. I close my eyes again. My hand heads for my pocket, where my family's picture stays safe. I imagine the picture in my head, my wife smiling as her hair flows back from the wind. The summer sun shinning at her back, and my daughter laughing the way only babies can. I remember that day. A good day at the beach. A normal day. I open my eyes again, and I am back in the real world.

The ODS'Ts surround me, all sad and surprised- but proud. All but the Commander.

"What the hell were you thinking, Rob?!" she asked. "You could have gotten yourself killed there. And for what? Petty vengeance?"

I had no answer.

"Ben was concerned about you. Did you know?" she said. "He said to me you were ready to kill yourself. You were _willing _to kill yourself. He told me that I have to keep an eye on you, so you won't do that. That was the last thing he said to me. If you do anything like that again, I _swear _I will kill you myself."

I did my best to hold back tears. I would not cry, I would never cry. The Commander was right. I was a pathetic little man. Weak, already dead inside. Ben wanted me alive- he wanted me to regain a purpose, to regain hope. Just before he was shot he offered me a home._ I will do that, for Ben. _I decided. _I will go to Earth, and visit the moon. I will go to the craters at its top and see the cheese-holes for myself. I will make myself a new home, and I will live._

4. Monsters and Men

CHAPTER 4

I look at my family's photo and imagine Ben standing beside them- laughing as he always had. 'I see the fire in your eyes. It blinds you. It consumes you.' he told me once, but without this fire I will stay in the dark. Every meaning life had before the war had begun was gone now. _If I don't live for vengeance I'll having nothing to live for, and if I had nothing to live for I'd rather be dead_. I thought. And then a wind blows the picture from my hand. It rolls away on the ground flying just out of reach. I chase it- I can not lose the last reminder of my family. I will not bear to forget their faces, to forget their smell and their warm touch, the feel of my small baby daughter in my arms, the feel of my wife's soft kiss, my mother's home-baked apple pie, my father's terrible jokes- ones that now make me laugh.

But god seemed to be taunting me. The picture takes a sharp turn to the right and flies into an unlit alley- one I would be wise to avoid. I didn't believe in god, but this was too much of a coincidence- the picture flying out of my hands and making me chase it across the streets as I'm made a fool in front of my squad. If a god exists are we just his entertainment? Does he enjoy watching us suffer? Or is this the devils work?

The picture stops dead on the ground, it's white back-side sitting up just in front of a large green garbage container. I lean down to pick it up, and as I do I notice something strange. Behind the green container, I see the edges of two small pink shoes, held back as if hiding away. I look back and see my squad stayed behind waiting for me, as if I was going through some kind of mental breakdown. I look back at the shoes, but now they aren't there. I smile and put the picture back in my pocket, where it's safe. I crawl lightly towards the container's edge, without making a sound. I had no need for weapons now, I just needed to tread carefully. I hear small, held back breaths.

I turn my external speaker on and let my squad listen. "You can come out now, I won't hurt you." I say, in the most calmed voice I could. There was no reply, and it seemed the child was still trying to hide. "Don't be afraid."

As I said that, a little girl jumped from behind the garbage can and began sprinting away down the alley, crying. "Don't run, I'm here to help you." I say, but she was already disappearing in the darkness. She still appeared as a red dot on my motion sensor. I turn on VISR and pursue her, the alley lighting up and being highlighted by many informative colors. "Girl, I am a human, like you. I work with the army, the UNSC. You must have heard of the UNSC." I say, trying to relax her. She was already out of sight, behind another garbage can, maybe. "Girl, where are you?" I ask, but my smile is quickly washed away. There were now four red dots on my motion sensor, coming from the far left side. If one was the girl, what were the other three? When I found her, she was hiding- what was she hiding from?

"Rob, where are you? What's happening?" the Commander asks over the comms.

"I have to go." I say, and mute them.

With renewed motivation, I sprint faster than I ever had towards those red dots and unhook the Assault Rifle from my belt. At the first junction, I turn left. In front of me were three Covenant troops- a Brute and two Grunts. _Here it is. Another fight. _Before they even realized I was there, I begin spraying them with bullets. I scream hard as the bullets tear the Grunts apart, spraying hot blue blood across the empty, gray streets- I forgot my speaker was still on, but I guess that only made me feel better.

Both the Grunts fell quickly as the bullets shredded through their exoskeleton, they hardly managed to make the pitiful squeaks they usually made when they died. The Brute still stood when I began shooting at him, mouth gaping wide almost as much as its eyes- revealing a row of teeth as large as a shark's. I laughed as the bullets penetrated its face and tore through the skin around it. The Brute falls back, hitting the ground with a hard smack and beginning

to spasm on the ground. I run to him and begin kicking his head into the ground until I hear a loud crack.

I was breathing hard when I was done with them, and the armor at my feet was ankle deep in black Brute blood- but I haven't felt this alive in a long time.

A small red dot on my motion sensor flashed behind me and I do a 180 degree spin, cocking my Assault Rifle up and aiming straight. It was the little girl, and it seemed she wasn't sure if she should thank me or run away. I drop the weapon on the floor and raise my hand, suddenly realizing how much I must have looked like a sadistic psychopath. "They were monsters. I couldn't let them hurt you." I say, slowly approaching her. She still looked afraid, and it seemed my attempts at calming her were a failure.

She begins running again, but this time I catch her and hold on with both hands. She tries to struggle away, squirming between my armed hands. "Calm down, girl. I'm here to help you. You have to trust me." I say, still calm. I grip her harder with one arm, and use the other to remove my helmet. The helmet drops to the ground with a metallic clang. "Stop for a second. Look at me." I say, and she listens, tears still streaming from her eyes. "I'm a human, like you."

I let her go and she takes two steps back. Still crouched low on the floor, I can now see her well- she has long yellow hair and gray eyes, though they may have been green- I couldn't tell in that light. She seemed no older than 3. My daughter would have been 3 if she lived. "I can help you. If you come with me, I will take you to a doctor and she will make sure you are okay. We'll get you back to your family." I say.

She shakes her head, tears drying on her cheeks.

No family. I thought. All of them slaughtered by the Covenant. "What's your name?" I ask.

"Jane." she said, suddenly confident.

"Rob!" I hear the Commander from behind me. I turn to see her and the rest of the squad, all geared up and ready for battle. "What-" she begins, but then- wide eyed- she notices the girl.

"This is Jane." I said.

5. Revelations

CHAPTER 5

The engines of the Phantom struggle against the planet's gravity, its thrusters pulsating with a blue light that shines through the darkness, and we are all silent-dead silent. We hid beneath cars when we first saw the beetle-shaped purple ship in the distance, trailing slowly between the white buildings. Jane stayed close to me, gripping my chest-piece hard. It has been a few minutes since we saw the ship, but now it was right on top of us- scanning with its big red laser as it went and covering the street with a line of concentrated red light that swept the empty streets and the vehicles and the big white buildings. I had never seen its kind before, and didn't even hear

about it till today. Under the cars we were safe from being detected by the scanner, but I was still very anxious.

I stare to my left, under the car, and see the red laser passing just beside me. Jane closes her eyes and I place my arm around her back to calm her. "Don't worry." I say. Had the car not been on top of us, the scanner would have detected our presence and dropped ground teams to "investigate". We would likely not survive such a powerful Covenant force, especially with a Phantom assisting it- blasting at us with its large plasma canon as we fight wave after wave of Covenant forces. Luckily, Cunningham spotted the Phantom and advised we hide. None of us have seen a Phantom like this before, but somehow she had known of it.

We waited five more minutes, until the Phantom was far out of our sight-line, until we came out of our hiding. After crawling out from under the car, I brushed dirt off of my armor. My squad now stood around me, gathered in a close circle. The Commander clicked her wrist touch-pad a few times and a small holographic map of New Kingston was lit between us. "We, are here." she said, pointing to a red dot around the middle of the city. "The ONI facility is 12 blocks away, here." she said, pointing to the large blocky holographic building. "I just got a report from Ascension. If we don't infiltrate the facility and wipe its systems within two hours, New Kingston will be gone along with any living civilians and a lot of public property."

"What civilians?" Frank asked. "This is a ghost town. And all this 'property' will just be blasted by the Covenant the second they deem this planet worthy of their glassing beam. They have an assault carrier orbiting Helios, and they probably intend to use it." Jane began crying again and I smacked Frank in the shoulder. It seemed he didn't care about hurting her at all. To him she was just another civilian getting in his way. He was always a prick. I thought, holding Jane close as she hugged me.

The Commander stared at Frank, as if angry that he dared question her. But then she sighed, as if giving up. "We aren't here just to wipe a few computers." she said. "This planet was deemed unfit for colonizing when humans first came here. The heats were uncomfortable, the sands were unbearably.. dirty, there was little water... We could have found ten worlds more appropriate for colonization without even twisting our little finger. But after we scanned this planet, we found something... abnormal about it. There was a large concentration of magnetic fields around its northern hemisphere, something we haven't seen anywhere before." Jane stares at her, seemingly interested.

"How does that relate to the reason why we're here?" Frank asked.

"After long research, scientists located the source of the anomaly- an artifact left behind by an ancient alien civilization. A civilization far more technologically advanced then we are today, and far older then us. This artifact may have been the only reason the Covenant came across this world- they know it's here. We're here to retrieve it, before the Covenant does." the Commander said.

"So what about the network?" Cunningham asks.

"The Cole Protocol was inflicted the second the Covenant were spotted in the system. The network was wiped immediately, as was any hint towards the location of Earth, Reach and the central colonies." the Commander answered.

"You lied to us. Why couldn't you just say the truth of our mission off the bat?" Jason asked.

"That's ONI's fault. Need-to-know only, they called it." she answered, but I didn't make me feel any less betrayed.

6. The Artifact

CHAPTER 6

The ONI facility was one of the biggest UNSC buildings I have ever seen. A huge gray box with huge glass doors and a large black sign imprinted with the words "Office of Naval Intelligence" along with the weird ONI symbol- a black and white pyramid with two black and white circles at its center, all trapped in a larger black ring. _Who came up with that? _I thought. Jane was walking close to me, and I was ready to defend her if I had to. "My father worked here, but I never came to visit. I never saw how it looks inside." Jane said.

"You will now. We'll have to take the artifact and whichever scientists are still there guarding it and get as far away from this city as possible. If the Covenant give up their search, this is the first place they'll blast on this planet." Cunningham said. Jason and Frank both followed farther behind- both seemed to be against the whole mission, believing that Ben and Harry could have lived had the UNSC just blasted the artifact instead of sending us to extract it. In a way, they were right, but the Commander said there was something special about it, that it might just win the war for us.

The Commander raises her fist, signaling us to stop and be silent. She holds her sniper up and zooms. "There seems to be a whole Covenant battalion here. But they are just waiting... They haven't entered the facility yet. Maybe they're waiting for orders." she says. I crouch beside her and zoom with my standard HUD device, it isn't as magnifying as the sniper, but it suits me well enough- especially with VISR activated. I see tens of them- two Brutes standing near the structure's entrance, having some sort of fight- pushing each-other as a few energy-shielded Jackals watched and laughed. Grunts were walking the perimeter all around the facility in squads of four- some just Grunts, others made of three Grunts and a Brute. There were plenty Jackal snipers perched in the buildings around us, all waiting.

The whole squad was clustered together now, zooming in and feeling the familiar sense of doom. I knew what I wanted to do, what someone _had_ to do. But I made a promise. _For Ben, I have to live this one out. And for Jane, I need to get her to Earth, to go with her. I'll quit this army if I have to. _"We need a distraction." I say, looking at each of them in turn.

"I can't sacrifice my squad, Rob, but someone will have to do it... It will be me." the Commander says. I understand her, I accept it, but sadness still manages to take me over. She was a good Commander, she _is_ a good Commander.

"No, Commander." Frank says. "I'll do it. I can hack this truck here," he said, pointing to a large truck parked nearby. "And I can ram into them. I'll make much more noise than you would with your sniper and I will surely get their attention. All of their attention. I'm a better driver than any of you."

The Commander gives him a sad smile, she understood that he was right. If he did what he planned, we really had a chance to make it inside the facility and get the artifact and Jane out of here. The Commander nods. "Drive down and around the structure, get as many patrol units on your back before you ram into their main cluster. When you're ready honk three times. That will surely get their attention, and it will be a good signal for us." the Commander says. She claps him on the back, amiably. "We will go a few blocks to our left, far away from your truck in case the Covenant understands our diversion. Wait five minutes before you leave. It was an honor serving with you."

Frank takes his helmet off and snaps the chain around his neck, where he kept his dog tags. He handed them to the Commander and said. "Tell my wife I'm sorry. Tell her it had to be done, and I had to do it." he said and the Commander nodded. Cunningham approaches and hugs him loosely before letting go and following the Commander. Jason hugs him tight, probably crushing his bones with his massive force. "Run over as much of those sons of bitches as you can, brother." he said and followed the Commander out of the street.

For the first time I feel like Frank's willing to sacrifice something for others. It seems he finally understood what it meant to be an ODS. At the beginning of our training we were told we were probably going to die, whether by falling too hard in our pods, by dehydration or hunger, or by just getting shot out of the blue like Ben, but they also mentioned sacrifice. They said there will come a time when we are needed- when our life is needed- and if that time comes a true ODS would know it, and they would do it. I go to him and take off my helmet as well, appreciating the midnight breeze. I smile to him, a smile coming from deep inside my heart, and where it was once pitch black darkness a spark has lit- a small fire, a good fire. I hold his shoulder and say "You are a good man, Frank. We will not let your sacrifice go to waste."

"You better." Frank says, smiling back. He stares at the little girl beside me. "She likes you." he said. "Get her to safety. The children are the most important, Rob, they are our future and if they don't survive the whole human race will extinguish." Jane looks at him with sad eyes, and we begin walking away. She then turns her head back. Frank looks at her, his smile leaving his face- now he must get the truck running and wait- a wait that will last forever, the calm before the storm. These were the last five minutes of his life.

We walked for two or three minutes before finding the right spot and then we heard the truck's engines running. We saw the trucks headlights as it wheeled past the two fighting Brutes and around the structure, attracting the attention of all the patrolling teams. Flocks of Covenant forces began pursuing him, even a couple of Ghosts and Choppers we haven't seen before. Will he make it? I thought. But Frank was too good a driver not to. He managed to go all around the facility, and now his truck was being eviscerated with plasma fire. But he kept driving, attracting all the snipers and shield

wielding Jackals before he finally sounded the truck's horn. I couldn't look anymore.

After three honks, we were off- silent and in the shadows. We walked to the building's back side unnoticed, as the commotion happened far away, where there was a large back door- a metallic gate much uglier than the formal entrance. We heard the sound of a crash echoing in the distance and we knew it was over. We had little time.

The Commander approached the gate and began searching for a way to open it. There was a small numeric panel at the door's side, but we didn't know the code. "Shit, what now?" the Commander asks, and it is the first time I have ever seen her this distressed, this out of control. Cunningham heads for it and begins pressing buttons, and Jane and me just looked around to make sure no Covenant forces remained behind. I couldn't see any. Then I noticed a small spherical black object on top of the door. I neared it and stared directly at its center- a camera. Squinting, I saw the camera follow me, watching us.

"There's someone in there, watching." I said, pointing at the camera and just as I did the gate buzzed- indicating it was ready to be opened. "Did you do that?" I asked Cunningham.

"No." she answered, swinging the gate open. "After you, Commander."

The facility was as empty as the city, just as dead as the rest of New Kingston. It was filled with small cubicle offices and phones and large holographic screens. Something about this place was very creepy. Suddenly we hear a 'ting' from our right. The whole squad turn, cocking their guns up and raising them to aim at a near elevator door which began creaking open. Jane stands behind me.

The door opens and a small ONI scientist wearing a black uniform comes out, raising his hands in panic when he sees our guns are pointed at him. "No! What are you doing?!" he asks. "You've come to get me out of here, not to kill me!"

"We've come here to get the artifact, not you." the Commander said, angered.

"You can't get it without me, marine. I have the codes, you have the guns. I risked my life to make sure the UNSC will get this artifact." the ONI man said.

"Well," Cunningham said. "Where is it?"

The scientist sighed. "Follow me." he said.

We followed him back into the elevator, and up until we reached the facility's 21st floor. The doors flung open to reveal another boring set of offices, cubicles and wide offices overlooking the cityscape. All of them empty. We walked through another white corridor and another set of offices, but then we took a sharp left turn to a sealed dark room, which the scientist opened with a scan of his eye and a voiced code- "Undid Eridium". The room was dark and cold, only lit by the glowing artifact at its center. It was a small crystal, about 7 inches long, and glowed with a purple aura. At first it seemed natural, but the closer I looked, the more it seemed to be

technological, with small electric pulses (almost like wires) running through it and visual recurring patterns on its surface, like small septagons. It looked like magic.

Cunningham sparked with curiosity, it was visible on her face as well as Jane's, and Jason stayed back with his mouth wide open. Then the commander grabbed it, just like that, and pulled it from its base. "No!" the scientist said. The crystal then glowed red and made a small beeping sound. "What do you think you're doing? It's a delicate item!"

"It's still working." she said, and began walking back.

"That is hardly a-" the scientist began saying, but then the alarm went off- a loud noise, endlessly ringing. The Covenant breached the building.

7. Sacrifice

CHAPTER 7

"Shit!" the scientist ran to a nearby computer monitor and quickly clicked the keyboard, revealing the facility's external cameras. It seemed the Brutes decided to blast a hole where the door used to be, and now the whole Covenant army was climbing in.

"Move." Cunningham said, pushing him aside. She took control of the monitor and activated the facility's lock-down procedures, covering nearly every door in the first floor with bars of hard steel. The scientist just watched her, petrified. "We'll have a few minutes before they can get to us, they'll have to cut through all of these bars now." she said.

"How do we get out of here?" the Commander asked the ONI scientist.

"I thought that was your job." the scientist said. "I've been surrounded for a few hours now and they haven't kicked the gate in. They were waiting for word from their Ship Captain, I assume. But now that your friend rammed a truck into them they decided to get in. You soldiers are good for nothing." he said.

The Commander grabbed him by the shirt collar and rammed him into the wall. "Shut up. From now on, you can only talk when you're addressed. You will be respectful or I will make sure you get out there by yourself. You'll be crying for us useless soldiers but we won't come." That seemed to shut him up good. "Now, this is a UNSC facility, not just ONI. You must have weapons and vehicles stocked here somewhere. A couple of Warthogs, maybe?" she said.

"Y-Yes sir! There is an armory at the first floor, in the garage." the scientist said. Apparently all it took was a little violence to suck his balls back in. I almost laughed him in the face, but I stopped myself. "But your... ODST has placed the first floor on lockdown. We're going to have as much trouble as the Covenant!" he said.

"Don't worry about that, we'll have access anywhere. We can open all the doors with your security code." Cunningham said.

We went back down the elevator and when the door opened, Jason and me existed into the corridor, weapons ready- Jason went left and I went right. "The corridor's clear." I tell the Commander and she, Jane, Cunningham and the scientist leave the elevator. We follow the path to the right, to get to the armory. Soon enough we hit a barred door. The scientist enters his code into the nearby panel and the bars swing up. After we all passed, he entered the code again and closed the door behind us.

Then we heard an explosion coming from behind us, small and concentrated. It seemed the Brutes were impatient- they were placing small explosives on the locked doors to destroy them. We ran faster, only to hit another set of bars. The scientist began entering a code, but he was getting it wrong. The stress was weighing down on him, it seemed. Another explosion sounded, this one closer. "Come on now." the Commander said. "Just enter the damned code."

I look at Jane and see her crying in the corner. "Don't be afraid, Jane. We're leaving now." I tell her.

"The monsters are coming." she said in between cries.

"I won't let them hurt you." I say, stroking her hair. It seemed to be calming her down, so I continued. "We're going to get out of this city now, to a place where there are no monsters." I say. Another explosion, this one even closer. "I'm going to take you to Earth. Have you ever heard of Earth?" I ask her.

"Yes." she says. The door opens, and we pass through.

After a minute of walking in silence, Cunningham broke the ice. "So, what is this... artifact." she said, struggling in her accent.

The scientist gave her a look, as if struggling to figure out if he should answer. "We don't know yet. We had a number of tests and all seemed to imply this is some sort of data container. Like a hard drive." he finally said, and opened another door. "But then, a couple of days ago, we decided to see its reaction to an electromagnetic pulse. Something happened- a pulse of purple light around it. The EMP didn't even affect it, it just strengthened its signal. As if the artifact identified us as a threat and was calling for help."

"It seems your test is what brought the Covenant here in the first place." Cunningham said.

"We didn't know! We couldn't have known! You think we wanted this? You think I wanted to stay here alone with only two damned rookies? They got themselves killed faster than I could blink my eyes. So I locked myself in here and I didn't open the doors. Not to the Covenant and not even to civilians. It was too much of a risk! If the Covenant get their hands on the artifact, who knows what they'll make it do!" he shouts, revealing more information than he needed too. Clearly he was guilty, and he should be. I could see them- families trying to knock at his door, the UNSC's door, for help when they couldn't evacuate. But he ignored them. He let them all rot until the Covenant came and wiped them out. I imagined Jane standing out there, crying for help, but all he would have done was look away.

Another boom sounds, but this one is closer- much closer. I turn my

head to the far left, where a small barred door stands still and strong. And then it blows up with blue plasma, sending dust, metal and concrete flying across the hallway. "RUN!" I scream. Cunningham takes Jane in her hands and sprints right into the busted hallway- a risk, but better than being pinned to the wall. My heart stops, as they disappear into the cloud of thick smoke. The dust settles and for a moment nothing happens. Jason then sprinted towards the blasted hole and the Commander and I followed him.

Everything happened at once: a shielded Jackal came out of the hole, Jason rammed it to the ground and shotgun-ed it in the face- splattering purple blood on the floor. And then a small grenade hits him in his center mass, blowing his hand to pieces. I sprint to help him but the Commander was already there. She was crying in the comms. I never heard her crying. I didn't know how to react. The Commander was now inside the hole. She killed the Brute that murdered Jason brutally- stabbing its face with her combat knife. Then she turned, slashing a charging Grunt in his gas tank. Another Grunt began running away but she shot him with her pistol, a clean head-shot that splattered blue blood across the floor. I had no work to do, she killed them all faster than I could blink.

She turned and kneeled by Jason, removing his helmet and checking his pulse. Dead. She fell on her hands, crying. "Commander, we have to go. We have to get out of here." I hear the steps of more Covenant forces coming from the hole in the wall, very close, so I pull the Commander up and we begin running. Only then did I remember the scientist, which wasn't running fast enough. His back got sprayed with purple needles and for a second he looked like a porcupine, before exploding in a sphere of purple smoke. But we kept running.

The next door's bars had already been lifted. It seems Cunningham managed to make out the code by watching the scientist insert it- luckily, or we would have been sitting ducks and the Covenant would have gotten us all. Beyond a set of double-doors, was the armory. It was a fairly large garage- filled with weapon racks containing all kinds of guns both heavy and light, and one vehicle, a large Warthog equipped with a chain-gun turret. The armory was shut away from the city with a huge iron plate which we could open with the same code, presumably, as the one the scientist used. We saw Cunningham sitting in the driver's seat of the Warthog, kneeling under the wheel, and Jane standing near it. It seemed like the car wasn't starting.

We barred the doors behind us. "Rob. Take this." the Commander said, handing me the glowing crystal.

"What? Why?" I ask.

"We have no time. There is a whole Covenant army at our backs and another out there. We can't handle that. I need to hold the Covenant off and give you a chance to get the Warthog running." the Commander said.

"No. Don't Commander. I'll do it." I say, forgetting my vow.

"You won't. I came here with a team of seven, and now we're three." Commander Kai said, breaking my heart. "I was responsible for them and they died on my watch. It is my job, and I must see it through."

"Commander, you can't." I say, feeling tears in my eyes.

"I have to." she said. "Rob, do you remember what Ben told you? If everyone sacrifices themselves there will be no one left to fight for. Go to Earth. Quit the army. Get a life. Vengeance won't bring back the dead, the best thing you can do for us is live. For me, for Ben. Live."

"I will." I said. "I'll do it."

"Good." she said, patting me on my shoulder. She then went to Cunningham, they talked for a few seconds and then they hugged. The Commander went back out, into the hallway that will be her grave. Jane watched with big, sad eyes as the Commander locked herself out and lowered the iron bars once more. Before the Commander left, she looked at me- she stared right into my heart. She deactivated her mike- she didn't want us to hear, but I'm sure she was listening. I heard bullets being fired, but it was the sound of the engine that broke me out of my saddened trance. I looked at the purple crystal in my hand. Could this little thing really win us the war? Was it worth all this death and sacrifice?

"Let's get out of here." I said, looking back at the building's interior where the faint sound of plasma fire echoed.

Jane sat at the passenger seat barely visible under the large angular green metal, and Cunningham took the wheel. "Open the door then, and hurry back. We will have seconds to get out before the Covenant will see us. They have Ghosts and Choppers and god knows what else. If they see us before we get a good head start, we're dead." she said. I went to the panel near the locked metal door.

"What's the code?" I ask.

"3435189117." she said.

I enter the code and walk back to the Warthog. "Jane, we're going home." I said, smiling to her, but she knew it was a false smile- she knew the Commander will die and a whole army was waiting for us outside. The gate makes a loud clunking sound before it begins lifting, and just as it does I sprint to the Warthog and get on the turret at its back, jumping up on the small green ledge and holding on to the rounded grip. I turn the massive turret around to face the opening gate. From the slowly widening crack came a ray of light- and as soon as it was wide enough Cunningham sped towards it.

The sun was rising, and the light of dawn lit the skies purple. In front of us was a Covenant army: Grunts, Jackals, Brutes, Choppers, Ghosts, a couple Banshees and a Wraith. Certain death. But for the lack of any other thing to do, I began shooting. The Grunts fell down fast as the heavy bullets penetrated their flesh. Even the Brutes didn't hold a chance- my turret dropped them faster than I had ever seen them drop. The Jackals were a bit more challenging, as you had to pop their shields first. It took only a few seconds before my turret filled the paved ground with a sea of alien bodies and colorful blood. Cunningham rammed through a wall of shielded Jackals, sending them flying into the air around us, but not leaving a scratch on the vehicle. I turn my turret right to face the enemy armada and the spinning rail under the turret makes a satisfying clicking

sound.

It was now that the Wraith noticed us, when we were almost to the other side of the street and past the main trouble. It spins to target us and sends a jolting blue sun of plasma arcing towards us in the sky. "Cunningham, go left!" I shout, and thankfully she reacted in time. The plasma projectile exploded with immense force just to our right. It was so close that I felt its heat. I heard Jane scream with terror and it renewed my motivation. Cunningham sped through the block. I could see two Grunts driving Ghosts were hot on our tails, along with the huge, motor-cycle like Chopper.

"_Ascension_, this is private Abigail Cunningham. Under the last order of Commander Yuki Kaiden I need immediate assistance." Cunningham said, barely steering away from a flipped car on the road as the Ghosts pursued us- shooting small bolts of blue plasma towards our Hog. I turn my turret to one of the Ghosts and begin spraying it long and hard. My teeth rattle and my hands shake but I managed to get the Grunt driver in the neck and the hovering winged vehicle laid flat on the ground. It seemed the Wraith was also following, but it was too slow.

"This is _Ascension_. _What do you need ODST?" Persephone called from the comms.

"I need a Pelican to pick us up, and fast. We have the artifact and we're being pursued by a whole Covenant armada." Cunningham said.

"Right away, ODST. Sending a pelican to your position, ETA 7 minutes. Is that all?" she asked.

"No. I need you to destroy the ONI facility. Lay the facility flat. There are hundreds of Covenant forces in it and around it just waiting to be destroyed." she said. How like Commander Kai- her last order was to destroy the facility with her. To destroy every trace of that wretched building along with many Covenant forces.

Silence. "A missile has been fired. I suggest you get as far away as you can, ODST." she says, and in reaction Cunningham steps on it. I aim at the second Ghost and spray it with a torrent of bullets, after two seconds it blows in a purple explosion. Two down, one to go. Out of the smoke of the wrecked Ghost, the Chopper leaped into the air and landed hard against the ground, spraying dirt all around as it made a sharp turn to follow us. Cunningham was trying to buy time and get as far away from the facility as possible, before it would blow. She zig-zagged between the white obelisks that were New Kingston's skyscrapers, but the Chopper followed persistently. Finally, it came in my line of fire- and I came in his.

The Chopper shoots yellow bolts at the Warthog and a large piece of metal breaks off and scrapes against the ground making a horrible sound before finally disconnecting. I was less successful at damaging the Chopper, as it had huge brown armored plates. I kept shooting at it, even when a yellow bolt caught me in my arm. But then, where the ONI facility was- only a kilometer behind us- I saw a small falling object with a rounded bottom. "Jane, cover your ears!" I said, and I barely manage to finish my sentence before it happened.

_BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO! _The explosion seemed to take half the city with it, growing and expanding from its center quickly. Within seconds, a ball of fire blocked the horizon, and as it grew larger it struck the sides of skyscrapers- I could see their glass windows shattering. And then all I could see was a blinding light. I closed my eyes and almost fell back as the shock-wave hit me. But I was alive, and the Warthog was still running. I opened my eyes to see the burning remains of the Chopper at the side of the street- I must have gotten him without realizing. I look up at the sky and see a pitch black mushroom of smoke the size of ten of these buildings combined.

I take a moment to remember the fallen: Harry- the recruit, Benny- my greatest friend, Frank- the one who sacrificed everything so we could get the artifact in our hands, Jason- who died so suddenly and of-course Commander Kai. She thought she failed her job, letting her whole team die, but I knew full well no one would have done it better than her. The smoke rose high in the sky and then, out of it, a Banshee came- in our direction. "Our trouble isn't over." I said. "A Banshee's coming." The old turret would be useless against it, and one shot of its green plasma canon will wipe us from the face of Helios. I let go of the turret and sit back.

The Warthog wheeled around a corner and right out of the city to open desert ground. At our right, the city sprawled and the mushroom cloud still expanded at its center. To our left was the sea- magnificent and blue with ripples and waves all around it. It has been years since I've been to the sea. Four years. I pull the small picture from my jacket pocket and see my wife Anna smiling as the wind took her hair, and my small Laura in her hands. We were at the beach that day- the sun was bright and there was a warm wind. A good day for the sea. I smiled.

"Are you okay, Jane?" I ask her. Still too shaken to answer, instead she nods.

"We're going home now. To a new home- to Earth. I will bring you there myself, and if you want I will stay with you. I'm done with the army, done with all this death." I said, looking up at the Banshee- which was coming closer and closer. I take off my helmet and brace the morning sun as it lightly touches my face. I see a green light form around the Banshee's plasma canon as it charges a shot. I take a deep breath of fresh air and close my eyes. I hear a blast. Am I dead, is this the afterlife? Will I see my family again now? Will I see Benny? Will I see the Commander? Will I see my parents and my friends? Will my soul finally be at peace? I open one eye to see the Banshee tumbling to the ground, destroyed.

Behind us, a Pelican flies- thrusters at full power and making small circles of dust on the rolling sands and its guns were hot. _If we all sacrifice ourselves there will be no one left to fight for._ The Commander told me. And she was right. I knew that now, after so much sacrifice._ Almost everyone I knew is dead, but I must continue, I must not give up._ From today and on, I will live. I will move to Earth and I will make it a new home. I will build a house and I will get new friends, maybe even a new family. I must move on, or my past will overcome me. _I see the fire in your eyes._ Benny said, but now a new fire burns inside me- hope. I will live; I will give Jane a new family and a home. _And I will visit that moon._

The Pelican lands and we park our Hog at its side. Medics run to our aid, to check our wounds and to make sure we are alright. They steal the artifact from my hands. We sit in the Pelican and it rises high above Helios. The view is, once again, beautiful.

End
file.